

## The Other Brethren:

# The Old German Baptist Brethren

First in a series of articles by William G. Willoughby on the four main groups that share a common heritage with The Brethren Church and which, along with The Brethren Church, will participate in a Brethren World Assembly July 15-18, 1992.

**H**AD A TIME MACHINE taken me back in time? Though the year was 1990, it seemed to me that I was attending a religious service of my Eastern Pennsylvania childhood — with its bonnets and beards, prayer veils and plain coats, and old-fashioned Brethren hospitality.

I had been invited to give two of a series of lectures on Brethren history to a gathering of about 500 Old German Baptist Brethren at the Ripon Community Center north of Modesto, California. Thirty years earlier the Old German Baptist Brethren had held a similar series of lectures, with Dr. Floyd Mallott of Bethany Theological Seminary as their lecturer.

As I entered the auditorium, many of the Brethren came forward to greet me. There was no suspicion of me as a worldly outsider. I was greeted with genuine warmth and sincerity — as a brother in Christ. Their friendliness was quite empowering.

### The "Old Order" Brethren

These were the "Old Order" Brethren, who in 1881 separated from the German Baptists (now the Church of the Brethren). These were the Brethren whose church services and style of living have changed little in the past hundred years. Their simple lifestyle and rejection of

worldly possessions are still evident in their homes, which exclude television, radios, VCR's, camcorders, and other "unnecessary luxuries."

Before the "opening devotions," animated conversation and neighborly visiting prevailed — signs of a vital and closely-knit community. But when one of the brothers took his place at the simple lectern, a reverent silence followed. No disturbing noise interrupted the reading of scripture or the voicing of heart-felt prayer. No organ or piano was needed to lead them in their singing. Their voices were raised in unison, as they sang with feeling and fervor. There was grandeur and dignity in the unaffected sincerity of their worship.

For an hour the first night I lectured on "Hochmann and Religious Freedom." The audience listened intently, even the children. No one dozed. No one left the room. It was not the brilliance of the lecture that held them, but their genuine desire for knowledge about their spiritual heritage.

After a brief intermission, there was another hour for questions. Still no one dozed, and no one left.

### Who are the Old German Baptist Brethren?

The Old German Baptist Brethren are the fourth largest of the five main branches of Brethren.\* With approximately 53 congregations scattered from Pennsylvania to Florida to California, they number about 6,000 in membership. One-half of them reside in Indiana and Ohio.

From about 1850 to 1881, under the leadership of conservative elders such

\*The other four branches are the Church of the Brethren, the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, the Dunkard Brethren, and The Brethren Church.

as Peter Nead, an Old Order movement within the church repeatedly petitioned the Annual Conference to resist more firmly the changes taking place "across the brotherhood." They wanted to continue in the "old ways" of their fathers. They were concerned that the Annual Meetings were approving "new and fast movements," such as Sunday schools, mission boards, and high schools. They wanted to be "separate from the ungodliness" around them.

### Resolutions of 1881

To solidify opposition to liberalizing trends, a special conference of Old Order Brethren met at the Ludlow-Painter Creek congregation in Southern Ohio. After much discussion, they adopted the "Resolutions of August 24th, 1881." Those members who accepted these Resolutions agreed to repudiate the Annual Meetings of the Brethren and to hold to the "old land marks" which their "fathers had set" and to hand them down to their children as they had learned them.

The Resolutions asserted that in their churches there must be "no Sunday-schools, no high schools, no revival meetings, no paid ministry, no missionary plans or mission boards . . . no single mode of feet washing, no musical instruments . . ." They also emphasized that the men should "strictly adhere to a plain and decent uniformity of dress as soldiers of King Immanuel . . . no fashionable mustaches and no roached or shingled hair." They further stated that the sisters should "wear a plain, modest dress and bonnet; also a plain white cap in time of worship or on going abroad."

Within a few years, a number of congregations in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Virginia, and Maryland accepted the Resolutions and changed their name to

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*The articles in this series were written for Messenger, the Church of the Brethren magazine, and were shared with the EVANGELIST editor by the editor of that publication.*



Old German Baptist Brethren, which is the name they retain today. They believe they are the true heirs of the Schwarzenau Brethren of 1708.

## Annual Meeting

Every year since 1883, they have had their own Annual Meeting at the time of Pentecost. In many ways it is like a Brethren General Conference, but in many ways it is quite different.

It is usually held on a farm near one of their meeting houses. Two large tents are erected — one for their meetings, the other for meals provided by the host congregation. There are other small tents — concession stands for the sale of food. Since several thousand may be present, the logistical problem of providing food and shelter is awesome.\*

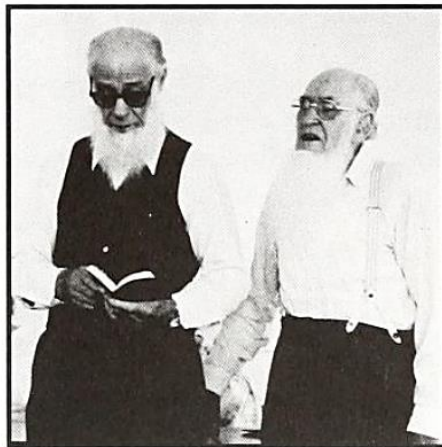
Members gather for a Saturday afternoon "preaching service," but the Annual Meeting really begins on Pentecost Sunday. There is no raised platform, but in the center of the circular tent there is a long table, around which the elders sit. On the front benches other ministers and deacons sit.

This is a day for singing, praying, and preaching. The service opens with a minister "lining" a hymn — reading several lines which the congregation then sings in unison. The singing is congregational. There is no special music, no four-part harmony, no piano or organ, no quartets or choirs. The haunting, ethereal character of the congregational singing has had an almost hypnotic effect on many a visitor.

The prayers by various ministers are always extemporaneous, expressing their obvious sincerity and concern for those in the community who are hurting, and their deep devotion to Christ and the church.

Customarily there is one main sermon, lasting about an hour, followed by shorter sermons in response. It is my understanding that none of the ministers has been officially notified that he is to be the "main speaker," although there is

\*The North Manchester, Ind., First Brethren Church prepared and served the meals for the Old German Baptist Brethren Annual Meeting held May 21-24, 1988. See "N. Manchester Brethren Serve Old German Baptist Conference," July/August 1988 *EVANGELIST*, p. 21.



*Two brethren of the Old German Baptist Brethren Church demonstrate hymn-lining to members of The Brethren Church during a visit to an Old German Baptist Brethren meeting house that was part of the Brethren heritage tour during the 1989 General Conference, held at North Manchester, Ind.*

a tacit understanding about who will speak.

After a noon meal recess, the afternoon service continues in much the same manner. The tent is crowded. The singing is vibrant and enthusiastic. The preaching is long, and the hard, sometimes backless benches are certainly a test of devotion.

On Pentecost evening, the love feast service is celebrated very much as it was over 200 years ago. Only Old German Baptist Brethren members participate. Non-members may observe.

After the service of feet-washing, the meal is placed on the long tables. It is eaten in silence. Following the meal, the salutation of the holy kiss is passed from one member to another.

The bread and cup of Communion follow. Since women are not allowed to break the bread or pass the cup of fermented wine to each other, an elder gives each woman a portion of bread and holds the cup for each one. Women do not participate in leading worship or in speaking. These are functions for men only.

## Business sessions

On Monday and Tuesday, the "messengers" (delegates) from the various congregations deliberate in a business session on the items that are passed to

them by Standing Committee. There is very little business. The few items that are considered deal mostly with the relationship of the Old German Baptist Brethren to the impinging world around them, or to business and practices of the community.

For example, when automobiles first appeared, they were generally opposed. But so many members bought them that the 1920 Annual Meeting resolved that those Brethren who had been expelled for buying automobiles should be "restored" to fellowship. It was stipulated, however, that the Brethren should buy only "cheap and plain" automobiles.

In 1925 the Annual Meeting decided that the radio was not in harmony with the life and teaching of Christ.

Some queries deal with matters of ritual, such as the one concerning the lining of hymns. Should the minister line two or four lines? Annual Meeting wisely answered that either way was all right, "depending upon the kind of hymn and circumstances under which it is used."

The Sunday services in the local congregations are similar to the Sunday services at their Annual Meeting, only shorter. There are no bulletins, no musical instruments, no pulpits. Traditionally the women sit on one side of the aisle and the men on the other, although this practice is not as rigidly followed as it once was.

**A**FTER completing my lectures, I felt deeply grateful for the experience. I was touched by the loyalty and dedication of the Old German Baptist Brethren to their Pietist-Anabaptist heritage. I was even more touched by the genuine community (*Gemeinschaft*) present in their common life.

I could understand what drew Dr. Floyd Mallott, in his retirement, to ask for rebaptism into the "Old Order." I could understand the joy of the young Church of the Brethren couple, recent graduates of the University of La Verne, who were also rebaptized. They all found something in the Old German Baptist Brethren they apparently had not found in the Church of the Brethren — a simple, but structured faith; a disciplined, but loving and caring community. [†]



## The Other Brethren:

# The Dunkard Brethren

Second in a series of articles by William G. Willoughby on the four main groups that share a common heritage with The Brethren Church and which, along with The Brethren Church, will participate in a Brethren World Assembly July 15-18, 1992.

**B**OTH my grandfathers were elders in the same York County Church of the Brethren congregation when it split," a friend of mine from Pennsylvania remarked. "One stayed with the Church of the Brethren, the other went with the Dunkard Brethren."

"When did that occur?" I asked.

"In 1926. I was just a small child, but I remember it well. It caused a division in our family. Some relatives would not speak to other relatives. That was very painful to me."

As we discussed this matter, we discovered that I was a distant relative of one, and perhaps of both grandfathers!

Recently, while attending a conference at Bridgewater College, I met one of the plaincoated elders from a Dunkard Brethren congregation in Pennsylvania. As we conversed, I soon discovered that we were distant cousins.

### A common spiritual heritage

Such experiences emphasize the familial relationships connecting all the five major groups of Brethren. Even when there is no genealogical relationship, there is a common spiritual heritage that binds us together.

All five groups share the heritage of Alexander Mack and the eight valiant men and women baptized at Schwarzenau in 1708. All of us were together until 1881. Our common

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loyalty to the New Testament teachings and ordinances bind us together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

All of us share common memories and history: Christian Liebe spending two years as a prisoner and galley slave; Peter Becker leading the first love feast in the New World at Germantown on Christmas day; the Sower Bible; the westward migration; the agony of the Civil War; the martyrdom of John Kline; the theology of Peter Nead; the unhappy divisions of 1881-83.

During the early twenties of this century, however, some of the more conservative members of the Church of the Brethren became increasingly concerned over the "lowering of standards" in the church: women were now wearing hats; men were wearing neckties; the "plain garb" was no longer required as a mark of discipleship.

Some churches had installed organs and pianos in their meeting houses. An increasing number of pastors were receiving salaries. Even divorce in some cases was not considered a reason for disfellowship. Such "worldly" changes caused some members great sadness and concern, especially when those changes were sanctioned by Annual Meeting.

One of the most threatening trends for the conservative Brethren was the growing attraction and power of the colleges. The conservatives did not oppose "practical learning," such as tentmaking, carpentry, or bricklaying, but they did oppose worldly "philosophy and vain deceit."

### Declaration of independence

After many queries to Annual Meeting concerning the wayward direction the church was taking, a group of conservative Brethren met at

Plevna, Indiana, in 1926 and made this statement: "... as a part of the loyal and faithful of the present Church of the Brethren we see no other remedy for relief than to obey the gospel, and to declare ourselves independent, and to reorganize, and to reestablish the true faith of the gospel amongst us." They called themselves "Dunkard Brethren."

To attend one of their services today is to experience a pattern of worship little changed from 1926. In all their churches the services are essentially the same.

### A Sunday morning service

Recently I attended a Sunday morning service in a very small, rural church about 90 miles east of Los Angeles. Their "meeting house" preserved a pattern common in our own past: no steeple, educational plant, or gymnasium; no landscaping with "unproductive" shrubs. In the small sanctuary that could seat about sixty, there were no stained glass windows, no flowers, no organ or piano. The very simplicity of the little church bespoke a simple faith.

Sunday school began at ten o'clock with opening devotions. In this congregation just one class was held, in the sanctuary, for all age groups. The teacher gave an able and informal verse-by-verse exposition of II John. Larger congregations may have several classes for children. The Sunday school hour was closed with the singing of a hymn from the shape-note Brethren hymnal published in 1901. The hymn, "I'll Count My Blessings," was sung unaccompanied, boldly, and fervently.

As the hymn was ending, the minister went forward to stand behind the pulpit. There he read Psalm 139 with great expression. Following the



reading, he preached for 20 minutes on various themes drawn from that psalm. The congregation then knelt for prayer, which was concluded with the Lord's Prayer. After being reseated, we sang what I thought was the concluding hymn — No. 1 in the old black hymnal, "Thy Gracious Power."

Instead of pronouncing a benediction, however, the minister read Matthew 18:1-22, after which he preached eloquently for 40 more minutes on the theme: "Forgiveness." Except for its length, it was a sermon that could well have been preached in almost any Brethren church. Following the sermon we again knelt for prayer, and a second repetition of the Lord's Prayer.

The final hymn of the service was "I am Trusting Thee," after which the congregation was dismissed. It was a very simple service — no bulletins, no special music, no ushers, no invocation, no benediction, and, amazingly, no offering. (The offering had been taken during the Sunday school hour.) Our attention had been centered on the Word of God's forgiveness and grace, and our human response.

### The smallest of the Brethren

The Dunkard Brethren is the smallest of the five main groups of Brethren, with approximately one thousand members scattered across the country in 26 churches and four districts. They meet yearly in June for their General Conference, its location rotating by district.

In 1991 the General Conference of the Dunkard Brethren was held at Santa Cruz, California. It began on Saturday afternoon, June 15. Preaching services were held morning, after-

# THE BRETHREN HYMNAL

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## 1 Thy Gracious Power. C. M. D.

*Omniscience.—Psa. 139: 1-6.*

J. THOMPSON. GEO. B. HOLSINGER.

The Brethren Hymnal of 1991 used notes of various shapes rather than all round notes.

noon, and evening for three and a half days, with much singing from the 1901 hymnal and much praying on their knees. All prayers were concluded with the Lord's Prayer.

Wednesday was set apart for the business session. The delegate body consisted of 21 elders, 6 ministers, and 16 deacons, all male. Their business consisted of one item of unfinished business and one query from a congregation. In addition, reports from various boards and committees were received: the Mission Board, the Civilian Service Board, the Relief Board, and several others. The Decorum Committee was responsible for youth activities at the conference.

The Dunkard Brethren have no denominational headquarters, no salaried pastors, no salaried executives, yet they have been able to maintain a close-knit "extended family relationship" for 65 years and across three thousand miles.

The church actively supports the Torreon Navajo Mission in Cuba,

New Mexico. It publishes an inspirational magazine, the *Bible Monitor*, twice a month. Some churches contribute to foreign missions through other agencies. All are diligent in caring for the needy in their own congregations.

### Striving after holiness

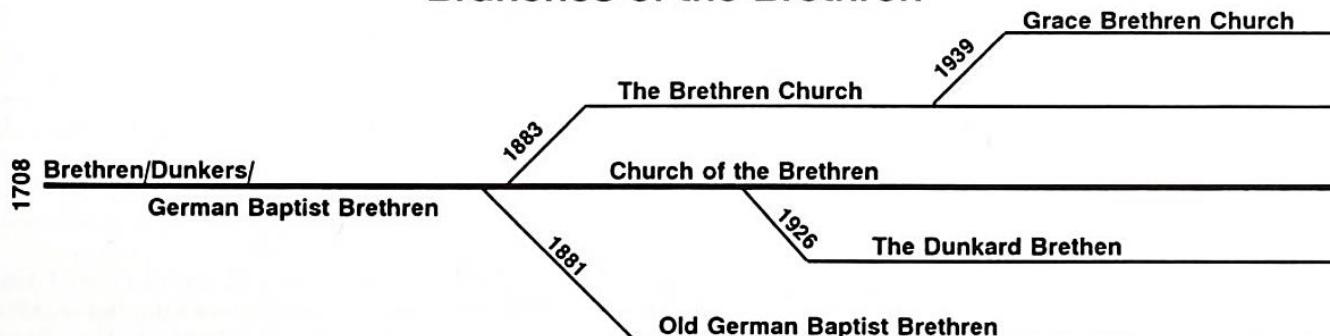
In a world where greed reigns and consumerism flourishes, the Dunkard Brethren strive to be "more sanctified, more righteous, more holy, and more perfect through faith and obedience." In a hedonistic culture they are disciplined and restrained. In a world of alienation and loneliness, they enjoy the warmth and support of genuine community. In a world of violence, they are a people of peace.

They are the first to admit, however, that they are not perfect in their discipleship. They continue to hear a voice they cannot ignore:

*Be ye therefore perfect . . .  
and be not conformed to this  
world . . .*

[†]

### Branches of the Brethren





# The Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches

Third in a series of articles by William G. Willoughby on the four main groups that share a common heritage with The Brethren Church and which, along with The Brethren Church, will participate in a Brethren World Assembly July 15-18, 1992.

**I** FOUND it almost incredible! Sixty young people in a congregation of about 200 people gathered for Sunday morning worship were listening intently as the Grace Brethren pastor preached for forty-five minutes.

## Worship considered important

Among these junior high, senior high, and college age youth there was very little shuffling or whispering. These young people considered worship important! They had attended a Sunday school class for an hour preceding the worship service, but few, if any, had slipped away between the two services.

I had entered the sanctuary about fifteen minutes early and was surrounded by contemporary gospel music being played over the speaker system. The animated conversation of the people as they gathered demonstrated, I felt, a genuine sense of joy and authentic community.

This Grace Brethren congregation holds two services each Sunday morning. I attended the second one and learned from a young man seated next to me that the two services were essentially the same — with one exception: “The first service, composed mostly of adults, was,” he said, “more subdued.”

There was no traditional call to worship. In fact, there was no formal beginning. The four guitarists, the

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person playing the synthesizer, the pianist at the grand piano, and the organist simply took their places on the raised platform and began to play — with great gusto. A large screen on the front wall displayed the words of their hymns by means of an overhead projector. The hymnbooks in the pews were not used at this service.

Only one hymn familiar to me was sung: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” It was very appropriate, for the theme of the sermon was the holiness of God. The rest of the singing was what I would call “contemporary gospel,” which the congregation sang with great enthusiasm.

No formal order of service was included in the very professionally printed bulletin, which described numerous opportunities for prayer, growth, and service.

At a particular moment in the service, the unrobed choir — men and women from various parts of the congregation — went up on the platform, which had no pulpit, no choir benches, only a lectern. The song leader directed them in singing “Strength of the Lord.” As they returned to their seats, the congregation applauded vigorously.

## A sermon on God’s holiness

Following the offertory, the pastor rose and stood before the people on the same level as the congregation. “Ah,” I thought, “perhaps this is a carry-over from the Brethren meeting house days!” I soon dismissed that idea from my mind.

The minister, who was very fluent, preached for 45 minutes without notes on “Holiness: The Best Way to View God’s Beauty.” He referred at times to professional athletic teams

and other contemporary situations. His sermon, an exposition of Psalm 99, would have been well-received, I believe, in almost any Brethren Church.

Following the sermon, the screen was electrically lowered, and the congregation sang “gospel songs and hymns” for about ten minutes, with loud accompaniment from the “orchestra.” An “alter call” concluded the service.

The congregation was undeniably an *ecclesia* of devoted Christians. Other Grace Brethren churches may not have an orchestra and may be less informal, but the spirit of Christ and the presence of God are no doubt experienced in all of them.

## Fastest-growing Brethren group

The Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches is the second largest and the fastest growing of the five major Brethren groups. It developed out of a conflict in The Brethren Church in the twenties and thirties over the control of Ashland College and Seminary. The more “fundamental” pastors and leaders were displeased with what they considered “modernistic” trends in the church.

In 1937 they established their own seminary, Grace Seminary, which in 1939 was moved to Winona Lake, Indiana, where it is today — with about 160 students. In 1948 Grace College was established, which today has about 650 students.

At the 1939 General Conference of The Brethren Church, a number of delegates from churches who refused to support Ashland College and Seminary and the denominational program were excluded from the conference. A large number of delegates sympathetic to the conser-



vative cause thereupon walked out, and in 1940 had their own conference. Each group claimed that it was the legitimate Brethren Church and that the other had departed from "historic Brethrenism."

Today there are about 300 Grace Brethren congregations in the U.S., with two-thirds of them in six states: California, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The monthly publication of the Grace Brethren is the *Brethren Missionary Herald*, published at Winona Lake.

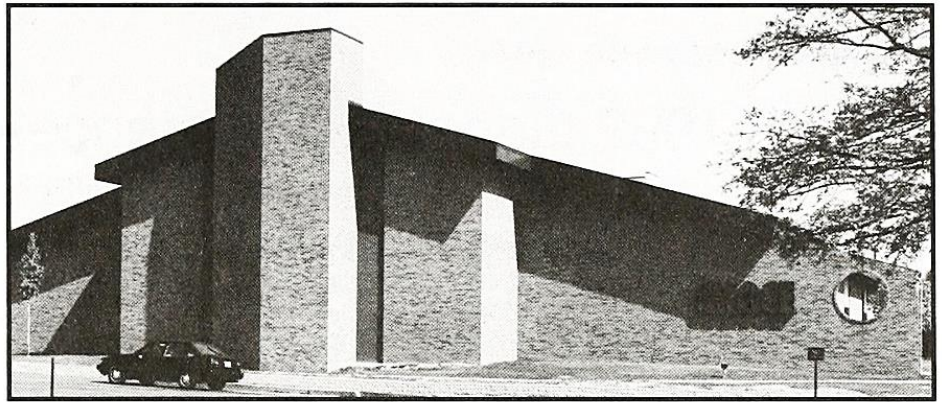
The annual conference of the Grace Brethren is usually held at Winona Lake. The church has emphasized missions, evangelism, and church growth, and now has more than 39,000 members in the United States, with attendance averaging approximately 42,000. The denomination has mission work in Argentina, Brazil, Central African Republic, Chad, England, France, Germany, Japan, the Philippines, and Mexico.\*

The church has supported the military and military chaplaincy, encouraged its young people to serve in the armed forces of World War II, and celebrated the victory of the United States against Iraq. About thirty Grace Brethren ministers have served as full-time military chaplains.

### Grace Brethren theology

Theologically, the Grace Brethren consider themselves unapologetically "evangelical-fundamentalistic." A "covenant of faith," which is similar in many ways to the old "Brethren's Card," is signed yearly by all trustees and faculty members of Grace College and Seminary.

\*There are approximately 750 Grace Brethren mission churches worldwide, with 600 in the Central African Republic, where membership exceeds 145,000.



*The Grace Brethren Church in Ashland, Ohio, with a membership of 630 and an average attendance of about 940 is the eighth largest congregation in the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches. It, like approximately 40 other Grace Brethren churches, has a Christian school.*

The Grace Brethren firmly believe in the verbal inerrancy of the scriptures, in the imminent second coming of Christ, in the existence and personality of Satan, and in the eternal security of the believer. They are also firmly opposed to the ecumenical movement and the "social gospel."

In all of their churches, the Grace Brethren retain some of the traditional Brethren practices, such as the Love Feast, anointing, and trine immersion. It is clear, though, that they feel more "at home" with other fundamentalist groups than with the other Brethren groups.

In my contacts with Grace Brethren leaders, however, they were not hostile to me as a person. But I definitely got the impression that they are reluctant to cooperate officially with any of the Brethren groups. The one exception, I believe, has been in the publication of *The Brethren Encyclopedia*.

Perhaps in the years to come there will be other cooperative efforts to reclaim what is good in the Brethren heritage. A recent statement by Dr. James Boyer, professor emeritus at

Grace Theological Seminary, is encouraging: "... it is always wrong when God's people cannot get along as brothers."

### A solid hope for the future

At times I wonder about the future of the Brethren groups in American society. Will they diminish in numbers to fade soon from the scene? Will they become so acculturated by a dominating, secular society or an evangelical-fundamentalist crusade that they will lose their Anabaptist-Pietistic heritage altogether? Will they go their separate ways as brothers and sisters estranged one from another, communicating only spasmodically or not at all?

And then I think of the sixty young people in the morning worship service of a Grace Brethren Church; and of the young people in the Old Order and Dunkard Brethren churches continuing in a tradition of non-conformity to the world; and of the 2,500 Church of the Brethren young people at a National Youth Conference; and my hope for the future abounds! [†]



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**M**Y GRANDFATHER was 22 years old when the "Old Order Brethren" in 1881 established their own denominational identity as Old German Baptist Brethren. He was 24 when The Brethren Church was organized in 1883 at Dayton, Ohio.

In his lifetime (he died in 1949), the Church of the Brethren as a whole changed more rapidly and more extensively perhaps than any other denomination in America. Yet some congregations, especially in Pennsylvania, changed very little. Except for their loyalty to the Church of the Brethren Annual Meeting, they were hardly distinguishable from the Old German Baptist Brethren.

### Unity with diversity

Perhaps the splits of 1881-83 taught the church a painful but valuable lesson — that the unity of the church can be maintained only if diversity (within limits) is respected. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between some urban congregations and some rural congregations in the Church of the Brethren today, or between the Brethren Revival Fellowship (a conservative group that encourages such practices as the wearing of the prayer covering), and the Womaen's [sic] Caucus (a group that works for

equality in the denomination). Yet the church is still one.

The Church of the Brethren in practice, worship, and basic Christian beliefs is very similar to The Brethren Church. Trine immersion, anointing, the full Love Feast, the centrality of Christ, a strong biblical emphasis, and much more are common to both denominations. There are significant differences, but they are no greater, perhaps, than differences within congregations of the Church of the Brethren.

Today, with headquarters at Elgin, Ill., the approximately 150,000 members of the Church of the Brethren express their Christian witness through more than a thousand congregations, 24 districts, 34 camps, 25 retirement communities, and seven institutions of higher education.

The denomination oversees the operation of the Service Center at New Windsor, Md., several SERRV stores (which sell the crafts and products of people in refugee camps and underdeveloped countries), an office in Washington, D.C., and an office in Geneva, Switzerland. Refugee/Disaster Services, extensive overseas aid programs, and the On Earth Peace Assembly are headquartered at New Windsor, Md.

### Dynamic movements

To understand the Church of the Brethren today, it is necessary to be aware of some of the dynamic movements in its development during this century.

One of the areas of most rapid change was that of traditional practices. Pictures of Annual Conference in the twenties and later in the forties show the quickness with which

Brethren shed their distinctive garb. Also during this period choirs were formed and robed, pulpits installed, organs bought, new church buildings with steeples constructed, and worship centers with crosses placed in sanctuaries.

Another dynamic movement in the church was the eagerness with which many Brethren leaders embraced cooperative efforts with other denominations in the twenties and thirties — Sunday school associations, local councils of churches, cooperative efforts to oppose repeal of the 18th amendment, etc. In 1941 Annual Conference voted to accept membership in the Federal Council of Churches and later the World Council of Churches. In doing this the leaders of the church sincerely believed that they were being guided by the Holy Spirit to help overcome the animosity and discord which fracture the Body of Christ.

### Anabaptist-Pietistic identity

This movement took a sharp turn in 1966 when the Louisville Annual Conference rejected a proposal to participate fully in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). In that decision, the church decided that it could best participate in ecumenical Christianity by maintaining its own identity as an Anabaptist-Pietistic denomination rather than by moving toward possible union with other "mainline" denominations.

But the ecumenical spirit remains strong. Today there are at least 45 ministers serving in cooperative church agencies or as chaplains. Brethren are active as leaders in many local and state Councils of Churches, Church Women United,

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*Church of the Brethren General Offices, Elgin, Illinois.*

Photo by Kermion Thomasson.

the National Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches.

Another influential movement stimulating change was the enthusiastic embracing of higher education, in spite of the traditional suspicion of education by a large proportion of the membership. In every case the various colleges were established with the avowed purpose of helping to protect young people of the church from the "corrupting" influences of the world. Yet each college in its own way became a significant agent of change, whether for good or for ill, in the life of the church.

### **Institutions of higher learning**

Similar to the pattern of Ashland College (established in 1878), from 1883 to 1905 thirteen different "normal schools" or colleges were begun, of which six colleges and a seminary remain. They are (with date of founding): Juniata College, Huntingdon, Pa. (1876); Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, Va. (1880); McPherson College, McPherson, Kans. (1887); Manchester College, North Manchester, In. (1889); University of La Verne, La Verne, Calif. (1891); Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pa. (1900); Bethany Theological Seminary, Oak Brook, Ill. (1905)

In 1990-91 there were more than ten thousand full-time equivalent students attending Church of the Brethren educational institutions. The vast majority of these students are not Brethren.

These colleges and the seminary have influenced the Church of the Brethren in several profound ways:

First, they facilitated the church's

transition from the "free ministry" to a salaried, "set-apart" ministry. Most of the ministers and denominational leaders of the church have been products of the colleges and the seminary.

Secondly, they provided leadership in biblical interpretation and theological understanding, so that the church weathered the "Fundamentalist-Modernist" controversy of the twenties and thirties quite well.

As a result, the denomination is generally committed to a broader interpretation of the Bible rather than to a strictly literal one. Bridgewater College, for example, was the first church-related institution in the South that used evolution as a theoretical framework for its biology classes. In both the seminary and colleges the Bible is generally taught as the inspired word of God mediated through human beings in a historical context.

Thirdly, they provided the impetus for new programs and ventures. It was on the Manchester College campus that the first initiatives were taken for a new program called Brethren Volunteer Service and later for Brethren Colleges Abroad. For several decades almost all the moderators of Annual Conference were Brethren college presidents.

### **The influence of *Messenger***

Perhaps the most instrumental factor for promoting change and for maintaining the unity of the church was the denominational magazine *Messenger* and its predecessors. This resource provided the scattered Brethren news of their brothers and

sisters and also served as a forum for dealing with issues as they arose in the life of the church. In addition, Brethren Press publishes Sunday school literature, devotional works, and books on Brethren history.

One change that my grandfather, progressive though he was, looked upon with a degree of disapproval was the authorization by Conference in 1922 for women to be licensed to preach. In 1958 conference approved the ordination of women. Today about half the students at Bethany Theological Seminary are women.

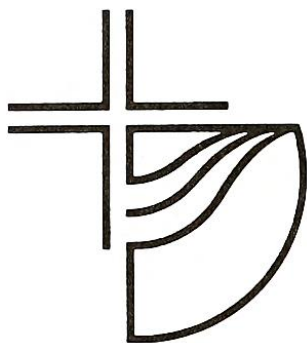
A rather recent development in the Church of the Brethren has been the change from a "Germanic-background," family interrelated denomination to one that is increasingly ethnically diverse. Today there are churches that are Korean, Black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican-American. The first black moderator was elected in 1987.

### **A shift in priorities**

Another amazing change has been the shift from a denomination primarily dedicated to taking care of its own to one involved heavily in evangelism, missions, social service, and social action.

1. *Evangelism*: In the mid-19th century the church frowned on revival services and displays of emotion. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the church was strongly influenced by the revivalistic movements of that period. Congregations that did not have a "series of meetings" at least once a year were looked upon with some





Church of the Brethren logo

*"Conscious of the great diversity in the church, but with a deep sense of its unity in Christ, the Church of the Brethren today faces the future with a keen sense of its need for God's guidance and help."*

suspicion. In the last 40 years, however, there has been a noticeable lessening of such evangelistic efforts, with more emphasis put on membership classes and personal invitations.

2. *Missions:* Since 1883 the Church of the Brethren has been very active in missions, both at home and overseas. It established missions in India in 1894, China in 1918, and Africa in 1922.

During these years many generations of students were involved in the Student Volunteer Movement and supported enthusiastically its goal of the "evangelization of the world in this generation," promising their Lord to go wherever He wanted them to go.

In the fifties, however, the philosophy of missions was modified to emphasize working with established Christian churches in other countries. The church encouraged the Brethren in India and Africa to unite with their "national" churches.

Recently, however there has been a renewed interest in overseas missions, and the church is now contemplating the intentional planting of the Church of the Brethren in Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Brazil.

3. *Social service:* One of the notable contributions of the church was to work with Mennonites, Quakers, and others to administer Civilian Public Service for conscientious objectors during the Second World War. About one in ten of the Brethren young men drafted chose that course, while nine out of ten chose to go into the armed forces, many as non-combatants.

During the Second World War the church also provided leadership in resettling Japanese-Americans in the

Middle West from "internment camps" in California.

Expressions of Brethren initiatives in peacemaking included a program of International Christian Youth Exchange, the Christian Rural Overseas Program (which developed later into Church World Service and CROP), and the Heifer Project — all of which are now interdenominational.

The most recent development is disaster child care, in which trained workers provide child care to the victims of natural disasters, while their parents try to put their lives back together. This, too, has now become interdenominational.

4. *Social action:* Many members were active in the Emergency Peace Campaign of the late thirties, the civil rights movement of the sixties and the seventies, and the women's movement of the eighties. In all these and other such activities, the motivation was discipleship to Jesus with sincere attempts to obey His teachings, such as "blessed are the peacemakers," and to follow Him in helping to "set at liberty those who are oppressed."

### Responses to today's stresses

Today the Church of the Brethren endeavors to remain faithful in its mission, but it feels unusual stresses from the diversity of its membership and from the fact that for a number of years membership has declined. There are varied responses to this situation.

Some members would like the church to return to a more faithful expression of its Anabaptist-Pietistic heritage, cease its involvement in programs of social change, withdraw from active participation in the ecumenical movement, and "stop

imitating the mainline churches."

Others would like the church to be much more evangelical. They advocate a more literal interpretation of the Bible and a return to what they consider to be "sound Bible doctrines and practices." They express their views through the Brethren Revival Fellowship.

Still others would urge the church to adopt many of the methods used by television evangelists and "mega-churches." They propose the use of contemporary soft rock and musical instruments of various kinds. They also urge the utilization of modern programs of church growth to "give people what they want."

Some would call on the church to take daring steps to apply the teachings of Christ to contemporary issues, such as treating AIDS patients with compassion and respect, accepting homosexual persons as equal brothers and sisters in the faith, using "inclusive language" in the worship services, and working toward a more equalitarian acceptance of women and ethnic groups in the structures of the church and the colleges.

Conscious of the great diversity in the church, but with a deep sense of its unity in Christ, the Church of the Brethren today faces the future with a keen sense of its need for God's guidance and help. Its mission statement, "Vision for the 90's," approved overwhelmingly by Annual Conference, emphasizes a renewed commitment to evangelism and witness, to scripture and heritage, to the family and youth, to service and peace, and to spiritual renewal and ministry "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." [†]